

Feb2011

## **Tales from Sheet Nine**

by David Garber

The men's and women's senior national championships are in progress as this column is written. Reminds me that over age 50 curlers have been the backbone of the game since I started in the curling racket as a tyke circa 1961. Since that hallowed time, lots of aspects of the Roarin' Game have changed.

The other day I was wandering around and came upon a large semi-trailer parked in front of a curling club. It was open so I went inside. I thought I had been transported to the movie *Lost Horizon* (substitute the Alps for the Himalayas)—the place was full of modern curling stuff and staffed by Olympian Debbie McCormick. It's always a pleasure to see Debbie, we had a nice visit, then I toured the premises and here's some of what I found.

First, I bought a nice wine bottle stopper with a mini curling stone on top. I am a sucker for these good quality knickknacks because they were so rare, in the USA at least, in my early curling days. The Chinese did not curl then, let alone win world championships, and neither did they manufacture curling *stuff*. In the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, as I journeyed around the world of curling, I bought more and more stuff, and pretty soon I had a small *collection*—mini-granite rocks, crystal rocks, and my favorite, books about curling.

Now, unfortunately for Debbie, this uncontrollable urge to collect curling stuff does *not* apply to curling *equipment*. Equipment needed to be familiar and broken in, and therefore kept in small quantities, and made to last as long as possible.

My first curling shoes were called "boots" and had high tops, ala chukkas. I coveted the Ernie Richardson model. Curling boots were *warm*, had to be, since many ice houses were not heated. Later, I kept one and sometimes two pair of curling shoes in my personal stock, replacing them only when the right toes wore out from dragging on the ice (the rudder to keep the fish-tail at bay).

After the days of corn, for me about age 20, I first used a brush with a small diameter shaft, which I snapped off while sweeping one day (younger and stronger then!) nearly getting the jagged broken edge through the heart. Thereafter, I used an oversized hog hair brush with the sturdiest shaft I could find, made even heavier when I added a custom Teflon-coated hardwood sliding block to the head, to elevate the hairs off the ice and thus avoid drag—a custom job that was possibly pre-Maskelesqe! I still have the 22 pound monstrosity, but I now use a Hammer, which was new when I bought it several decades ago, much lighter, and made of plastic which I could use for a slider with no drag. I changed the head once so I could say I wore the first one out.

Hammers were economical. I noted in Debbie's trailer that new brushes and shoes are priced like stealth aircraft. I'm not sure if they show up on radar, but they are made of rich Corinthian leather and inch-thick Teflon (the shoes) and the brushes with shafts made of Bucky balls or something unbreakable, all while weighing two grams. The cloth on the heads can make rocks go 30 feet further and not abrade pebble, or something like that.

I never owned a broom bag, it was cheaper to use a buddy's!

In those good old days, curlers wore big, wooly, warm *curling* sweaters. They did not make noise when the curler went in motion. On the other hand, lots of men wore slacks like the Norwegian men in the 2010 Olympic Games, with various Scottish plaids.

Icemaking was more an art and less a science than today. I can remember hand scraping with a heavy manual scraper that really provided us young guys with a workout. A few clubs managed to have true, very fast ice. More had at least one of their sheets with poor ice. But the art of ice reading was far advanced compared to today. On the other hand, training is far advanced and today's curlers of all ages have deliveries that allow them to be much more accurate and consistent on the broom.

Fortunately, the most important component of curling, the ethos of the Game from club to championship level, survives, with few exceptions.

-30-